

VZCZCXRO0696

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RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHVB #0316/01 1081211  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 171211Z APR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8825  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ZAGREB 000316

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR, EUR/SCE, EUR/RPM; USNATO FOR JONES,  
UNDERWOOD, BAEZ; NSC FOR BRAUN; OSD FOR POPOVIC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [NATO](#) [HR](#)

SUBJECT: NATO REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN DIES OF NATURAL CAUSES

REF: ZAGREB 0086 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. SUMMARY: The "Committee for a Referendum on Entry into NATO," an NGO consortium, ended its petition campaign April 12 with less than one-third of the required 450,000 signatures needed to force a referendum. In an April 11 meeting with Pol Counselor, committee spokesperson Aleksandar Hatzivelkos called the campaign a productive exercise in democracy despite the failure to reach the signature threshold of 10 percent of registered voters within 15 days. He assured Post the referendum campaign was not anti-US or anti-NATO, though several NGOs actively opposing NATO membership played significant roles in the petition campaign. Hatzivelkos added that the Committee's decision to time the petition drive to straddle the Bucharest Summit and President Bush's visit had been a miscalculation, as it led to the effort to force a referendum being linked in the public's mind with anti-Americanism and anti-NATO sentiment, discouraging many voters from signing.

¶2. SUMMARY (cont.) AND COMMENT: Committee members would present the approximately 125,000 signatures to Parliament and then shift their efforts away from NATO per se, and toward a focus on reforming Croatia's referendum law, which sets criteria they say are virtually impossible to meet. The Committee is also asking the Croatian Parliament to schedule a referendum despite their failure to collect the necessary signatures. Post is confident, however, that the failure of this effort signals final closure of the NATO referendum issue in Croatia, particularly with public support for joining NATO now over 60 percent. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

DIVISIONS WITHIN CAMPAIGN COST SIGNATURES  
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¶3. At an April 15 press conference, Hatzivelkos announced after 15 days collecting signatures in 84 cities, the petition drive had collected only 124,457 valid signatures, while some 450,000 would have been needed to compel a referendum. Nearly half of the signatures came from Zagreb, where the campaign was much more organized than elsewhere in the country. Hatzivelkos argued that the number of signatures nonetheless represented strong public interest in a referendum and said the Committee was still urging the parliament to schedule a public vote on NATO. Post is certain the Croatian will not take up this suggestion.

¶4. At the April 11 meeting with POLCOUNS, Hatzivelkos, accompanied by Committee member Mirela Travar, had described the tension within the referendum committee, as openly anti-NATO NGOs tried to use the petition drive to discredit NATO, while committee leaders were desperately trying to keep the campaign focused on the call to make the decision via a

referendum, rather than on whether joining NATO was a good or bad thing in itself. Citizens must be educated and then make an informed decision, Hatzivelkos argued, describing his organization as pro-democracy rather than pro- or anti-NATO. These internal divisions became critical during the April 4-5 visit of President Bush. While the committee chose the two-week period around the NATO Summit and Bush visit hoping it would turn public attention to the membership issue, small but highly visible anti-Bush protests organized by the committee's anti-NATO faction served to radicalize the referendum issue, according to Hatzivelkos, and kept many Croatians who favor NATO but would like to see a referendum from signing the petition. He also noted a lack of support from political parties; the Youth Forum of the opposition Social Democratic Party, or SDP, was the only active supporter of the campaign. (NOTE: SDP President Zoran Milanovic was the most prominent signatory of the petition, but made clear when he signed that both he and his party were strongly pro-NATO.)

¶5. Hatzivelkos also complained about three major flaws he sees in the provisions and implementation of the referendum law:

- the 15-day window for signature collection is unreasonably short,
- the requirement for signatures from 10 percent of registered voters is particularly difficult to meet when Croatia's voters lists are widely acknowledged to be inflated by deceased or duplicate voters, and
- the GoC told the committee it must record each signatory's government identification number (a social security number equivalent), while this number no longer appears on identification documents and laws are contradictory on how the number may be used.

At the April 15 press conference, the Committee proposed

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Croatia's law on referendums be amended to lower the threshold to 2.5% of registered voters, provide a 30-day window for the petition drive, and delete the requirement for personal ID numbers to be included.

POLLS: SUPPORT FOR MEMBERSHIP CONTINUES TO GROW

¶6. While the referendum drive fell flat, public opinion polls indicate continued growth in support for membership. The most recent poll, which overlapped with President Bush's Zagreb visit, showed that 70 percent of Croatians see the NATO invitation as a positive thing and 62 percent believe Croatian should accept NATO membership. Post expects this latter figure in particular could rise a bit further in the coming weeks.  
Bradtke